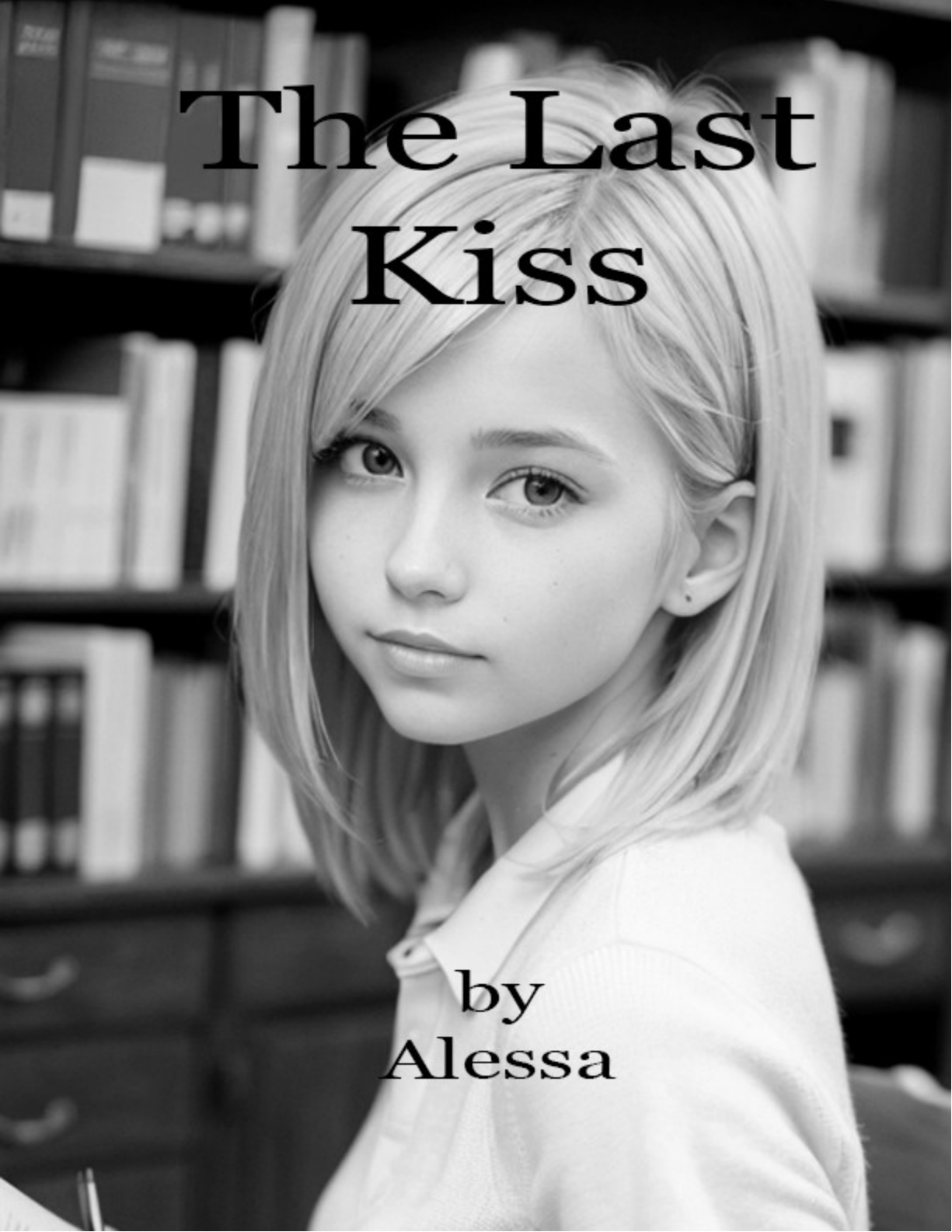




The Last Kiss

by
Alessa

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by Alessa

Seventeen years had passed. It felt like an eternity on occasion, especially when I'd gaze upon the calendar, observing the meticulous X marks on each day. The sheer volume of those crossed-out days across seventeen calendars served as undeniable evidence. My perception of time hadn't deceived me. There were no mischievous sprites to blame for distorting my sense of days, weeks, or years. Time had simply slipped by, and only now did I fully grasp the stupefying length of it all.

With a sigh, I conceded, "There's no need to mark the days any longer," and gently placed my pen down. Seventeen years had come and gone since Danielle's departure, and there was no reason to continue waiting for her.

The notion of a comforting cup of tea beckoned me to the kitchen, especially considering the frigid eastern wind that toyed with my quaint cottage. One, two, three... It took precisely twelve strides to traverse from my living room to the kitchen at my usual pace. I contemplated whether to wait for the kettle to heat the water or to fill it with cold water and allow the stove to warm it at its own leisure. Opting for the latter, I placed it on the burner.

This task consumed three minutes and twenty-seven seconds, commencing from the moment I stood up until the stove's flame ignited.

Those three minutes felt excruciatingly conspicuous. How had I let seventeen years slip through my fingers?

As thoughts of her filled my mind, I sensed the lingering warmth of her last kiss on my lips, tender and fleeting. Remembering it with precision didn't inflict immediate pain, but I knew that come nightfall, tears would inevitably flow. There was no shame in that prospect; tears welled up nearly every night, like a clock's unwavering tick. Each evening followed the same pattern.

First, I'd change into my nightdress and abandon my daytime clothes. Next, I'd diligently brush my teeth and untangle my hair from its braid. Finally, I'd recline in bed, extinguish the light, and release my memories into my pillow until the need to cry subsided.

There was nothing wrong with that.. Nothing to be condemned. Only a cherished memory: Danielle pausing by my desk after class...



"Excuse me, Ms. Addens? Might I have a word with you, regarding the assignment?"

The sunlight streaming through our classroom window had caught the hues of her hair, reflecting gold. I'd seen her in class before, of course—an eighth-grader with hair like candlelight and lowered eyes. However, I hadn't truly *noticed* her until that moment. She stood before me now, however, revealing details I hadn't previously seen. The way her hands clung together, like two frightened girls, afraid of the night. She was dressed in her school uniform, buttoned up to the collar, her skirt revealing her bare knees. Her unassuming, practical shoes and dark blue knee socks embedded themselves in my mind.

I readily agreed to assist her with the assignment. I dedicated more time than necessary to the details, interspersing questions about herself in between the editing and research annotations.

"What's your favourite colour?"

"Do you have any pets?"

"What are your aspirations?"

She visited my desk daily. Initially, our conversations revolved solely around the assignment, but eventually, it faded into the background, and she began sharing glimpses of her life. I learned how her father never talked to her anymore, her mother's preoccupation with church events rather than actual mass, and the loss of her brother to leukaemia when she was a small child. That fateful day had irrevocably distanced her from her family; they had become strangers living under the same roof.

"Are you often alone?" I asked her.

"No, not really. I'm almost always at school or the library now. I only go home to sleep."

I nodded, maintaining the softest of smiles. With each visit from Danielle, her demeanour and speech reminded me of a fawn—ever alert, always ready to run.

"One can be alone in a room teeming with people. You're aware of that, aren't you?"

Danielle glanced down at her hands. "Yes, I am aware. It seems like that almost all the time."

"Almost?" I asked. There was a certain quality in her voice at that moment, as though she had inadvertently revealed something she wished to keep hidden.

She hesitated before responding. "...yes."

"In that case, when do you *not* feel alone?"

She continued to gaze at her hands for a long time, leading me to believe she might remain silent. I was prepared to apologise for prying when she finally spoke.

"I... The only time I don't feel alone is when... when I'm with you."

I glanced up, startled, and there she was, her eyes locked on mine. A delicate blush painted her cheeks, a clear sign of her embarrassment, yet she refused to avert her gaze.

Since I had first laid eyes on her earlier that day in the classroom, I had known she possessed a certain beauty. However, that fact had never been as striking as it was in that precise moment. My heart

seemed to thud loudly in my chest as I found myself gazing into her deep blue eyes—warm, expectant, and tinged with shyness.

"I feel the same way, Danielle," I replied, grateful that my voice remained steady. A sense of excitement coursed through me, akin to a child on the brink of unwrapping Christmas presents when the packages were still unopened, but scared as well. She was undeniably beautiful, and I couldn't help but feel undeserving of someone so radiant in my life.

"I'm glad," she responded, still studying me, her gaze fixed upon my face as though searching for any hint of derision. Evidently, something in my expression concerned her, as she continued in an anxious tone, "No, really! I *am* glad. I've never felt..." She paused, struggling to find the right words, before pressing on. "You understand... me, I think. You actually listen when I speak. That's never happened before. Most of the time, when I talk to people, they're just waiting for me to finish so they can say whatever's on their minds."

Her words trailed off, and her eyes momentarily flicked away from mine. Embarrassment was written all over her face. I knew the script well; any moment now, she would offer an apology and hastily depart the room, burdened with shame and disappointment. I recognised this behaviour because it was precisely how *I* had reacted in the past. Whenever I drew close to someone, someone who possessed the power to expose me with a scornful glance and a mocking laugh, I would retreat and never return, fearful of being unmasked.

It had been too long. I had hesitated for too long. Danielle parted her lips, and the familiar words tumbled out—words that I had uttered countless times before. "I'm sorry. I think I may have crossed a line... you know. I'm sorry."

She reached down to retrieve her school bag and began to rise from her seat, preparing to make her exit. It was happening now, just as it had in the past when I had done it, a thousand times before. I considered merely sitting there and allowing it all to unfold. After all, she was a student, and I was her teacher, fifteen years her senior. It was improper, illegal, and, not to mention, career suicide. There was no logical reason to impede her retreat.

There was no logic...

"Wait, Danielle!" I cried out. I didn't sound calm any more. My voice was cracked and higher-pitched.

She stopped, her hand on the knob of the door, and turned around to look at me with her big blue eyes.

"Yes, Ms. Addens?"

I paused before I moved from behind my desk and walked closer to where she stood.

"Please, call me Erin."

Tremulously, I reached up with an uneven hand and touched her cheek, slowly caressing it with my fingers. Her skin was so soft, so perfect. Even though I knew at any moment now she would jerk away from me, slap me across the face, and scream, "Dyke! Lesbo!" in a justified rage, I knew I would forever remember the touch of her skin.

After that brief moment, I pulled my hand away from her face and looked aside. It would come. Any second now, the rage would begin, and I would be revealed to the world for my sins. Any moment...

"Would you like to go out for a walk with me, Erin?"

I turned my head abruptly towards her, my heart racing. Her smile beamed at me, a faint blush still on her cheeks. She remained there, radiating nothing but pure sweetness. Youthful and full of self-doubt, yet undeniably beautiful.

"Yes, Danni," I whispered. "Yes, I'd rather enjoy that."



The shrill cry of the kettle shattered my daydream, prompting me to rise from the sofa and tend to it on the stove. I counted twelve strides as I crossed into the kitchen, followed by another three to reach the cupboard for a teacup. Pouring the steaming water into the cup and adding a tea bag, I gently stirred it with a teaspoon from the drawer.

Twelve steps back to the couch, I had completed the task. There remained nothing else left to do for the day. As I gazed out of the window at the pine trees fencing my yard, I slipped back into the memory.



We'd been together for a month following that fateful day. It had been Danielle's last month in my class before school let out for the summer and when her school holidays started. I finally felt safe enough to go out into more popular places with her. We'd spend entire weekends riding our bicycles or walking along the beach, seeing the local museums and attractions during the day, making love in the evenings before she had to return home for the night. Occasionally, people would give us strange looks, but there was nothing overt. And as Danielle would say, why would we bother to notice the expressions of strangers when we had each other?

She just turned fourteen and had to report to her parents, but more and more often she would visit my townhouse and spend the night under the pretext of having a sleepover at one of her school friends' places. And even though it was still years away, it was almost unspoken that she would move in with me when she turned eighteen. I like to think that she was excited about the prospect of spending each day with me. I certainly was.

A week before the new school year started, she asked if we could go out on a date at a restaurant outside of town. I'd never heard of it, which was peculiar since I'd been near the area for almost five years now, but Danielle insisted that it was an excellent place to eat, so we ended up going.

The restaurant was a small, dingy place that served traditional Italian food. The entire place smelled of pizza and pasta, and with every breath, I was reminded of the house I grew up in and my grandmother's cooking.

"Do you like it?" she asked me anxiously as I took it all in.

"It's lovely," I assured her, walking with her to the table.

Feeling defiant and reckless, I ordered wine with dinner—the more expensive imported French vintage—in honour of the cuisine. The alcohol made us careless. We were at a table near the corner, which gave us the illusion of privacy, and Danielle began to stroke my hand with her fingers. I smiled at her and whispered for her to quit, but that only made her do it more.

Ever since our relationship began, she had been getting more and more confident. I loved watching her change and grow. She had now begun to do things on her own, make her own choices as to what she wanted to do with her time. The Italian restaurant idea, for instance. During the beginning of our relationship, she would never even offer suggestions as to what she wanted to do, but after a few weeks, she'd gained enough self-confidence to tell me what she wanted. To actually pick a restaurant was quite an achievement. I was proud of her. And I decided to tell her so.

"Oh, stop it, Erin," she smiled, and I laughed. I leaned forward to tell her something, undoubtedly about how tipsy I was feeling, when the impulse grabbed me, and I reached over and kissed her on the mouth.

She was startled at first—although we'd held hands in public before, we'd never kissed—but then relaxed into it. Her warm lips felt wonderful on mine—soft and comforting and tangy with wine. I closed my eyes, enjoying the feeling, when I heard a gasp.

Oh shit, I thought, and broke away from her instantly. I knew I shouldn't be so affected by the opinions of others, but nonetheless, I was terrified of hurtful comments from strangers, of the things they could say about us. Me, especially, because it was clear as day to everyone that Danielle was a minor, and yet here I was, kissing her on the lips and plying her with alcohol.

I glanced over at the woman who made the noise. It was an older lady, perhaps in her fifties, but her expression of disgust wasn't aimed at me but rather at Danielle.

Gathering my courage, I turned towards Danielle to make some sort of disarming comment about how rude people were these days, but she was staring back at the woman with a look of horror.

"Danni?" I asked, a question in my voice.

She glanced back at me, tears in her eyes. "Erin, I... I'm sorry. I have to go."

"But why?"

She turned her attention back to the woman but flinched suddenly. The woman had tossed her napkin onto her plate and was rising from her seat. Danielle began to rise as well.

As she instinctively pushed her chair back into place, she leaned in closer and whispered into my ear. "That's my mother. I need to go and talk to her. I can't just let her see us together without giving her an explanation."

"But..." I began, contemplating that I should go with her and offer her support, but she silenced me before I could continue.

"I have to handle this on my *own*, Erin. You know about my family. She won't cause a scene in public, but I know her. I have to do this alone."

"Alright," I whispered. Part of me screamed to not let her face this ordeal alone, to stand up and shield her from the inevitable confrontation that lay ahead. However, a more powerful force held me back. Who was I to assist her with her mother? I had never confided anything about my own preferences to my parents or anyone else. Danielle possessed more courage at her age than I ever did. Who was I, the coward, to offer my support?

The woman shot Danielle a piercing, pointed look and proceeded to march towards the restaurant's exit. Danielle instinctively began to follow but abruptly halted herself after taking just a few steps. Turning back to face me, despite the prying eyes of other diners in the restaurant, she rose onto her tiptoes and placed one final, fleeting kiss upon my lips.

It was the briefest of touches, but to this day, no matter where I find myself or whatever situation I'm in, I can still recall the sensation of that moment—the essence of that brief kiss.

With that, she turned around and departed from the restaurant without casting another glance behind her.

I never saw her again.



Afterward, I began keeping calendars meticulously. Time felt too precious to be left unchecked. A moment might give the illusion of lasting forever, but I remained aware that at any given second, the entire world could shift.

Danielle wouldn't have simply abandoned me. I understand this now, and I nearly understood it then, but there was that persistent, doubting voice within me. It incessantly highlighted the glaringly obvious—it was all my fault. I was older and responsible for her. As her teacher, and with her being just fourteen, it was only natural for her to move on from me. Perhaps she had made that decision right there, in the restaurant, before things grew too complicated with the relocation. But more plausibly, her parents had intervened. They may have even contacted the authorities, and any day now, I would receive a visit from the police, spelling the end of my job, my future, and my life.

I had believed this voice for the longest time. The fact that she hadn't said goodbye to me, not even during the entire month following the incident at the restaurant, didn't provoke panic or concern for her. As pathetic as it may sound, it genuinely didn't occur to me that she hadn't left me of her own accord.

An entire month passed, and I never once worried about her.

Then they discovered the bodies.

"Horrific Accident Kills Mother and Daughter" blared the headlines of the local newspaper. They had located the minivan at the bottom of a nearby lake, just beneath the cliff where a highway meandered through the city. The guardrail had been obliterated by another car accident earlier that same week, destroying the section completely. Fortunately, that particular collision had not resulted in any fatalities, and the road was promptly reopened to traffic.

However, devoid of a guardrail and lacking any telltale skid marks, no one realised that another accident had transpired at that very spot. An entire month passed before they stumbled upon the wreckage... and the bodies.

I had traversed that road, passed that exact location, daily on my way to work throughout that dreadful month. Unaware of her fate, concealed within a submerged, sunken metal monstrosity, her dead eyes stared blankly at me from beneath the water... Danielle had the most beautiful blue eyes.

The newspapers insisted it was an accident. They proclaimed that there were no signs of foul play and it was nothing more than a case of reckless driving.

But the newspapers hadn't witnessed Danielle's mother at the restaurant. They hadn't seen the expression on her face—the utter revulsion and cold disdain.

I shared my knowledge with no one.

I grieved in my own silent manner and eventually managed to get work at a different school. I couldn't bear to drive on that highway any longer. Even within my home, I dared not open the blinds, fearing that the light would infiltrate and remind me of her hair. I was paralysed by the memories.

So I moved, found a new job, and found a new place in an attempt to start a new life.

That's when the counting began.

Time was precious. Every second devoid of tragedy was something to be acknowledged, cherished. So I count my steps, ensuring that I absorb every moment when the world does not crumble beneath me. It spiralled to the point where I couldn't cease, and eventually, all I could focus on were the numbers.

They stretched endlessly. I could count ceaselessly, every second of every day, and still never reach the end of the numbers. Counting provides a glimpse into the infinite. The numbers would last forever.

Unlike people.

I have never been with another girl since Danielle. I've already ruined one life with my presence. I doubt I could bear to inflict the same on another.

So here I sit, in my cottage, as my tea turns cold and the storm outside rages on. Each day, for the past seventeen years, I tally the minutes as they slip away, each one more precious and finite than the last.

The End